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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR FINDS ADENIS UNHAPPY WITH THE ROYG AND
PESSIMISTIC ABOUT 2009 ELECTIONS

Classified By: Ambassador Stephen A. Seche for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

¶1. (C) On a recent trip to the southern city of Aden, the Ambassador's conversations with his interlocutors confirmed our perception of a growing divide between the Sana'a-controlled local government and Aden's citizens. The most dire compared Yemen's south to an occupied territory, while others were merely pessimistic about the upcoming 2009 Parliamentary elections. ROYG officials, on the other hand, said that the south had been treated well and saw recent unrest in terms of a need for increased respect for the rule of law. While we did not sense the tension that other visitors to the region have reported, we saw and heard ample evidence that southern discontent runs deep and needs to be addressed. End Summary.

Southern Discomfort

¶2. (C) During the Ambassador's March 9-11 trip to Aden, opposition political party figures painted a bleak picture of the mood in Yemen's south. Insaf Mayo, Islahi MP and Chief of Islah's Aden Bureau, said the people of the south were "in despair" and feel "betrayed" by the government in Sana'a. He predicted that, without strong action by international partners to protect democracy, "things will get even worse." Ali al-Mahlati of the opposition Union of Popular Forces party also placed a share of the responsibility for difficulties faced by southerners at the international doorstep. He asked the Ambassador: "Why do you act slowly? ... after two years ... after people being killed left and right."

¶3. (C) Hisham Bashraheel, Editor-in-Chief of the influential independent - and openly critical of the ROYG - daily Al-Ayyam, said that many in Aden see President Saleh's March 8 speech in Hudaydah as a declaration of war. In it, Saleh said, "those who do not want this unity can go and drink from the sea." Al-Ayyam General Manager Basha Bashraheel noted that southerners, in the past, have always been wary of the unknown, fearing a possible return to the conditions of the socialist era but that by 2007 had become unhappy enough to say, "let's give the unknown a try."

¶4. (C) The strongest condemnation, however, was reserved for the ROYG's reaction to 2007's peaceful public demonstrations. Ali Munassar, Chief of the Aden Bureau of the opposition Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP), compared ROYG actions to those of Israel in the Gaza Strip. Referring to Israeli actions he said, "whenever there is oppression of peaceful demonstrations and live ammunition is used against naked chests, the government has gone down the wrong path. This regime is going down the same wrong path." Mayo also

criticized the ROYG for killing people participating in "legal and constitutional" demonstrations. (Note: A number of people have been killed or injured by government forces quelling what organizers insist were legal, peaceful demonstrations. End Note.)

15. (C) Basha Bashraheel claimed that his family had warned the President since 2006 that he needed to address the concerns of the south and had counseled him to "let them express their opinions and vent their anger." He further predicted that southerners would lose patience before the planned 2009 Parliamentary elections. When the Ambassador asked what would happen when patience runs out, he replied "assassinations of government officials ... government rule by day and no rules at night ... attacks on gas fields ... and all the increasing problems blamed by the government on Al-Qaeda."

Government or Occupier?

16. (C) Munassar, who is currently being pursued by the ROYG on charges of organizing the 2007 demonstrations, compared the current relationship between Aden and Sana'a to that of vassal state to its conqueror. Referring to the 1994 war he said: "The fierce crimes of that war destroyed the beautiful, willing unity. It was replaced by annexation of the south to the north." Al-Mahlati said that there had never been a true partnership between the north and south and then expounded a litany of high officials in the Adeni and southern governments who were all northerners. Al-Afif added that these imposed leaders "were not even good northerners," but rather, "corrupt ones."

17. (C) Nageeb Yabli, head of the Studies and Research

Division of the Aden Chamber of Commerce and Industry, told the Ambassador that Adenis called Governor Ahmed al-Kholani "Bremer," referring to the former head of the Coalition Provisional Authority in Iraq. Yabli later reinforced the allusion to the Saleh government as occupier. "Two years ago, the President hosted a dinner," he told the Ambassador. "He said to his (northern) guests, 'We gave you land. Why aren't you building on it? We are here. We are not leaving.' From this we see he is an occupier," concluded Yabli.

2009 elections

18. (C) The Ambassador's interlocutors were pessimistic about the prospect of free and fair Parliamentary elections in 2009. Munassar told the Ambassador that, absent a resolution of the ongoing crisis in the south, he did not believe that the Parliamentary elections could take place on time. Mayo said that no efforts had been made to repair the flawed electoral system that favors the ruling party. He added that the ruling party no longer believes in democracy or the orderly transfer of power. Mohammed al-Afif of the Nasserite Party complained that no elections in Yemen since 1997 had been based on democracy as Americans know it. He further complained that "99 percent of the election process is controlled by the regime."

19. (C) Outside of the parties, Hisham Bashraheel commented that his paper had urged the ROYG to start reforming the electoral process at an early stage and not to wait until "the new elections are coming." The ROYG, however, had waited and now the process would be much harder. Basha Bashraheel felt even more strongly that the upcoming elections would not go well. When the Ambassador mentioned the elections Basha muttered a single word: "disaster."

ROYG Officials Toe the Party Line

10. (C) When asked if he felt that Aden received good treatment from the central government in Sana'a, Governor

al-Kohlani, a former Governor of Sana'a and a northerner, said "we enjoy very responsive support that has helped to solve many problems." When asked about his population's suspicious view of rule from Sana'a, he said, "we work as one unified land." Deputy Governor Abdul Karim Shaif went even further, saying that the President pays particular attention to the needs of the south for two reasons: 1) because the region suffered so much under its previous government, and 2) because he is keen that the citizens not feel repressed.

A Way Forward?

¶11. (C) When asked how the situation could be corrected, the Bashraheels urged the formation of federal system and the local election of governors. Al-Afif called for a national conference that would allow for increased independence for local councils. He added that the problems need to be discussed by all parties in reference to the Yemeni Constitution as amended in 1994 and the peace and accord document presented before the 1994 civil war. For his part the Governor endorsed an increased focus on the "rule of law."

Comment

¶12. (C) As expected, the Ambassador found Adenis, in general, very unhappy with the ROYG. In spite of the strongly negative tone of most of the meetings, however, emboffs did not sense the tension that that other recent visitors have reported. The interlocutors seemed more resigned than anxious. Post saw no signs of Adenis taking to the streets, but, considering the strong (and sometimes lethal) ROYG response to previous demonstrations, this is not surprising. Nevertheless, the comments of post's interlocutors confirmed the perception that there is increasingly a rift between Adenis and their Sana'a-controlled government. End Comment
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